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**NIAS:  
THE ONLY OLDER MEgalithic  
TRADITION IN INDONESIA**

**Rumbi Mulia**



NIAS  
THE JEWEL IN THE CROWN OF  
TRADITION AND INNOVATION

*Dedicated to H.E. Adam Malik  
whose profound interest in archaeology made it  
possible for us to accompany him to Nias.*

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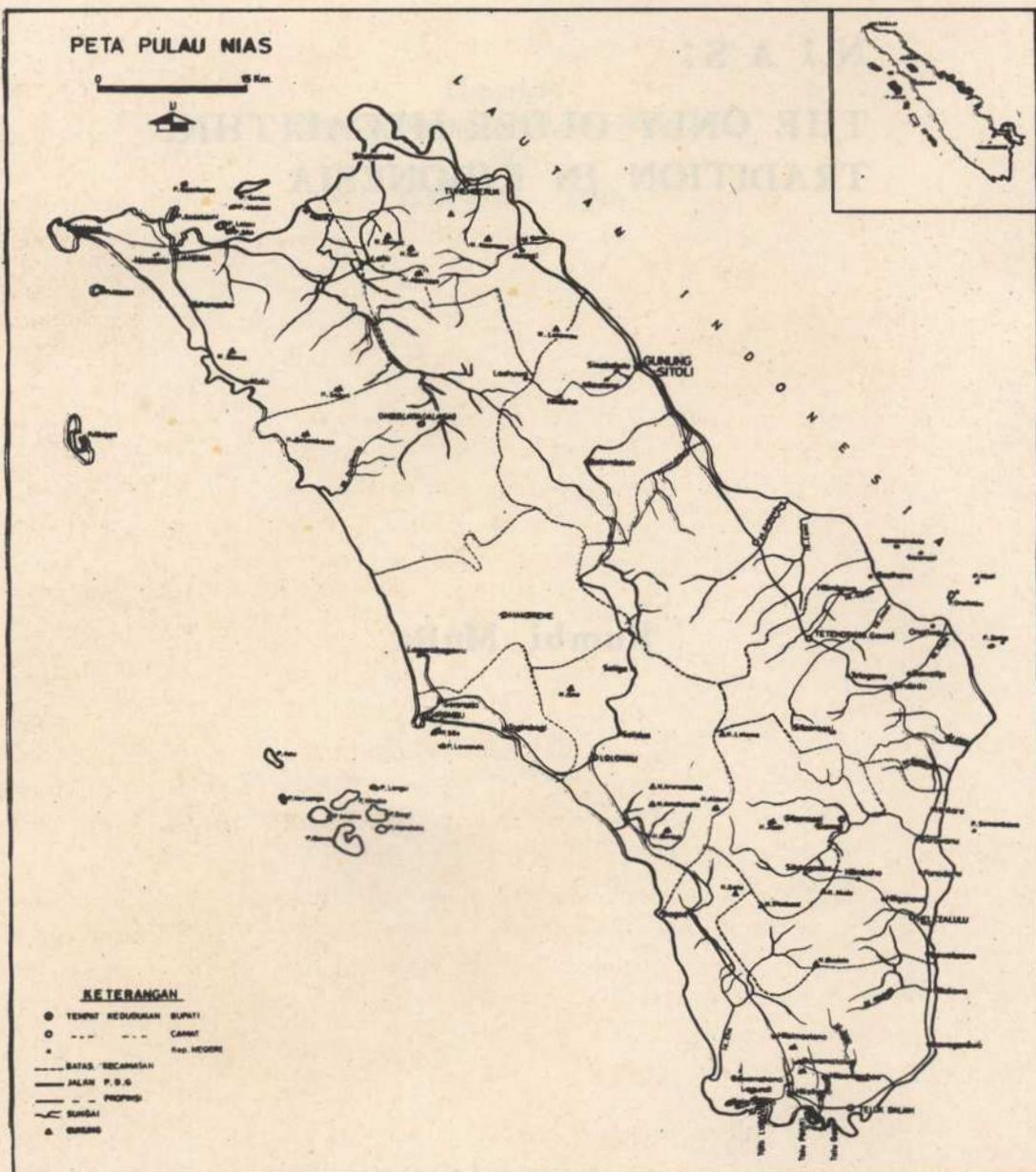
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N I A S:

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Map of Nias

# NIAS: THE ONLY OLDER MEgalithic TRADITION IN INDONESIA\*

## INTRODUCTION

To the west of Sumatra lies a group of islands of which the biggest is the island of Nias. Its geographical location isolates it from the other parts of Indonesia. Furthermore, the fact that the island is surrounded by coral reefs and banks, which makes the landing of ships dangerous and sometimes impossible, has made it even more secluded from the rest of the archipelago.

Nias is a relatively small island, covering an area of 4472 square km, approximately 120 km long and 40 km wide. Dense jungle covers the hills and mountains, making the villages on the hill inaccessible to outsiders.

The first literary record of Nias was made by an Arab merchant Suleiman (851 A.D.) who wrote about his travels and reported that there were head hunters on the island of "Niyang", by which he could only have meant Nias. The people themselves called the island *tano niha* (= land of the people) and referred to themselves as *ono niha* (= children of the people). It seems that the word *niha* was converted into *Nias*<sup>1</sup>.

As to the origin of the people of Nias, they probably belonged to the first branches of people coming from East Asia who populated the Indonesian archipelago. According to Heine-Geldern the "Uraustronesier" passed through the hills of Assam via mainland South East Asia to the Malay peninsula between 2500 and 1500 B.C. Those emigrants, called the Proto-Malay, once populated mainland South East Asia.

Subsequently they separated from the main population drift and divided into various branches. Some of them penetrated as far as Nias where they became relatively isolated. The fact that many natives of Nias have almond-shaped eyes and a light complexion may be an indication that those emigrants who settled on the island are of Mongolian descent.

Although Heine Geldern's theory and pre-war hypotheses of other scholars are currently viewed with great scepticism<sup>2</sup>), nevertheless it can not be denied that movements of people took place in pre-historic time. The Niasans owe their origin to more than one ethnic group of ancestors.

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Whether or not the term "migration" has to be rejected, the fact remains that branches of the Austronesians passed from mainland South East Asia over the archipelago reaching as far as Polynesia, influencing cultures of autochthonous inhabitants and stimulating new patterns in the area.

The conception of "mass migration" or waves of immigrants has been abandoned long ago but we have to accept that continual shifting of groups of people took place in early South East Asia.

### The megalithic culture.

Speculations on the origin of the megalithic culture started when MacMillan Brown (1907) put forward the idea that they represented traces of a "Caucasian" race which had come via the Mediterranean region and southern Asia. Some scholars agreed with this opinion that the megaliths must be ascribed to a "Caucasian" race which emigrated from Asia to Europe on one side and to the southern Pacific on the other. This "Caucasion" conception however was soon abandoned by scholars working in prehistory because of contradictions with archaeological facts.

According to Perry's hypothesis (1918) the megaliths in Indonesia originated from ancient Egypt, brought by people in quest of gold and metal who claimed themselves to be descendants of the "skyworld". This vague theory was also not workable because of lack of sufficient data.

According to Heine Geldern's theory, the megalithic culture entered mainland South East Asia in the late Neolithic time and came as part of the *quadrangular adze culture* between 2500 and 1500 B.C. About the fourth and third century B.C. the *Dongson* culture was introduced in South East Asia, accompanied by new megalithic features.

Based on these theories Heine Geldern distinguished at least two groups among the megalithic complexes in Indonesia, each entering in a series of cultural waves. The older group dating from the Neolithic period he called the *Older Megalithic Culture* and the second and more recent group which developed during the bronze and early iron age, the *Younger Megalithic Culture*.

The elaborate theories of Heine Geldern find no support among the post-war Western scholars. They consider them far too simple and no supporting stratigraphic evidence has been found (Glover 1979: 101). Nevertheless in the case of Nias the author will not refute Heine Geldern's supposition. Archaeological excavation in Nias has not started yet and the possibility of finding megaliths of a neolithic age and neolithic artefacts in a megalithic site it not ruled out. Joint application of archaeological and anthropological methods could produce more satisfactory results.

### The older megalithic culture.

Among the *characteristics* of this older megalithic complex mentioned by Heine Geldern (Heine Geldern 1945: 141) are the planting of rice, the brewing of beer from rice, the raising of pigs, the raising of cattle for sacrificial purposes, production of pottery, bark cloth, houses standing on piles, the custom of head hunting and the custom of erecting megalithic monuments as memorials of sacrificial feasts or as memorials to the dead. Most if not all of these features can be ascribed to the people of Nias, and they still exist today.

The *forms* of the older megalithic monuments are comprised of: menhirs, single or in groups; dolmens (not used as graves); stone seats; stone terraces; stone pyramids; stone avenues; stairways and causeways; stone paved assembly places; stone tanks built in connection with tombs; stone tombs; and simple stone statues. Most of these structures can be found in Nias, and indeed are often observable together at the same site. The assembly place in Nias is the paved square in front of the chief's house, used as a gathering place and for the dances.

The *art* of the older megalithic is mainly sculptural and monumental, and serves primarily the rites of ancestral cults. Firmly rooted in magic rituals, the art is symbolic and austere and is not practised for the purpose of decoration.

Symbols are used as substitutes for ornaments, such as rosettes and lozenges representing the sun and moon. Geometrical design related to the ancestral cults and sacrificial feasts decorate certain megaliths. Woman's breasts signifying fertility and a pig's head signifying wealth are common symbols.

Stone statues are primitive, sometimes with a mere indication of the face and are severely frontal.

The *religious* background of the megaliths concerns life after death. Megalithic monuments were erected to secure the souls of the dead a perpetual life in the hereafter or to proclaim that he who erected them has achieved fame, honour and success. They obviously served the purpose of honouring the living as well as the dead.

Chieftains, noblemen and other important men in the community erected menhirs as memorials of sacrificial feasts which increased their prestige and kept their names alive.

The erecting of megaliths also served as a link between the dead and the living. Stones of this kind are an outward sign of the connection between the existing community and its ancestors. Stone seats enable the deceased to participate in feasts and deliberations and pass their wisdom to the living.

This religious belief of the older megalithic culture continued and developed in the younger megalithic complex and even survived far into the twentieth century. The difference between the older and younger megalithic culture is largely in form of material expression.

### The younger megalithic culture.

The more recent complex of megaliths developed after the middle or the second half of the first millennium B.C. It can be ascertained that the younger megalithic culture only developed when metal became known in Indonesia.

Among the types of monuments characteristic of the younger megalithic complex are stone-cist graves, dolmens as graves, stone sarcophagi and stone vats. At the same time however, menhirs and ancestor figures of the older megalithic culture seem still to have been used.

One significant distinction between the older and younger megalithic complexes is the absence of stepped pyramids in the younger complex. Attention in the younger complex seemed to be concentrated particularly on the development of special types of graves, sarcophagi and stone vats.

In Central Sulawesi the cylindrical stone vats called *kalamba* served as graves, as indicated by the latest excavation (1976) of a stone vat in Birantua in the district of Poso<sup>3)</sup>. M. Colani (1932) drew attention to the resemblance between the *kalamba* of Sulawesi and the stone vats in the Plain of Jars in North Laos.

Survivals of the younger megalithic culture are found among the Bataks and Minangkabauans in Sumatra, the Dayaks of Kalimantan, the Torajas and Ngadas of Central Sulawesi, in the Lesser Sunda Islands and other parts of Eastern Indonesia.

However, the most remarkable specimens of the younger megalithic remains have been found in the *Pasemah* Highlands of South Sumatra. The images of *Pasemah* in particular, surpass all the other megalithic monuments. Among them is a large stone carved in the form of an elephant. A warrior is clinging with both hands to the elephant's ear. Around his neck the warrior has a bronze ring and he wears a girdle with a sword; on his shoulders hangs a bronze drum. This suggests that the megalith builders of *Pasemah* were acquainted with bronze.

The *art* of the younger megalithic is dynamic and ornamental. Considerable use is still made of symbols as depicted on the bronze objects, however. Heine Geldern notes that strong stylistic similarities existed between the sculptures of *Pasemah* and certain Chinese sculptures of the early Han period. The bronze drum of the warrior of *Pasemah* corresponded with the Han period. Paintings on the inside of a stone cist of *Pasemah* show the same style as the Han reliefs. There is even a possibility that the megalithic graves of Java might have been inspired by the Chinese graves of the early Han period. Ceramic finds from the Han period either excavated or found in South Sumatra has been reported<sup>4)</sup>.

Traces of both, older and younger megaliths are widespread in Indonesia.

The *older* megalithic complexes still surviving in South East Asia are found in remote regions: the mountain areas of *Assam* in east central India, the northern part of *Luzon* in the Philippines and the island of *Nias* in Indonesia. In less vigorous form they

are still observed in the mountains of Vietnam (Annam) and in some parts of the Lesser Sunda Islands in Indonesia.

The Nagas of Assam construct the *dahu*, a stepped pyramid marking the graves of the clan's ancestor. The same type of structure, a truncated pyramid built of rough stones containing the bones of the deceased ancestors, occurs in Nias (Pl. 1).

Traces of this construction of the older megaliths are also preserved on Java, on the *Yang* Plateau in Argapura (East Java). Stutterheim remarked on the resemblance between this type of structure and the *ahu* and *marae* of Polynesia. He also indicated that the monuments at *Sukuh* and *Ceta* (Central Java) dating from the 14th and 15th centuries were versions of those terraced monuments.

Another surviving example of stone terraces is found in *Banten* (West Java) where small terraces with menhirs and pyramids occur. Actually the terraced pyramid is a prototype for all the elaborate temple structures built in Java during the classical period.

The oldest megaliths undoubtedly date from the Neolithic period. The erection of megalithic structures continued when the stone age had given way to the age of bronze and iron and even today the megalithic tradition is still in existence.

Combined archaeological exploration and anthropological research should cast some light on whether the megalithic complex may have been associated with the quadrangular adze. By comparing forms of the megaliths and similarities of connected belief, it is obvious that they are related to the megaliths found in Central Asia. Megalithic alignments and stone circles are encountered in inner Tibet which indicates the similarities of cultural elements. The discovery of dolmens at Pagan confirms that megaliths also developed in Central Burma.

Heine Geldern pointed to the similarities between the megaliths of Assam in eastern central India and those of Nias. Münsterberger (1940) compared the megaliths of Nias and those of the Marquesas and Polynesia and showed the relationship of the two areas.

Heine Geldern attributed the megaliths to the "Uraustronesier" and it is generally accepted that the neolithic quadrangular adze seems to be typical of the culture of these people.

Generally speaking we cannot expect to discover surviving examples showing the full character of the older megalithic civilization as it may have existed over 2000 years ago. In this respect the island of *Nias* may be considered to be a favoured exception where the survival of the megalithic culture has been preserved without as much cultural loss as in other areas. Nowhere else has the role of the megaliths in a society been so pronounced as in Nias. Evidence of all the characteristics and forms of the older megalithic complex is observable throughout the island.

Contrary to the megaliths in other areas, of which nothing is certain about the builders, here in Nias it is obvious that the present population are descendants of the original builders and are fully aware of the significance of these monuments. Nias is



Pl. 1 Truncated pyramids built of rough stones, containing the skulls of chiefs.



Pl. 2 Stone structures in Tundrumbaho (district Gomo); the round stones in front are *niogadis* and belong to the wives of chiefs.

indeed the only area in Indonesia where the older megalithic tradition dating from neolithic time has persisted and flourished far into the twentieth century.

## THE MEGLITHS OF NIAS

Nearly all the villages on the island are situated high on the hills and may only be reached by climbing steep slopes, crossing rivers and passing deep gorges. In ancient times they were built in such inaccessible places as a defence measure.

But once we have arrived at a settlement the true conception of a megalithic site is displayed. Stone steps lead up to the village with its stone fortifications and stone paved streets. Along the streets, in front of the houses are long rows of megaliths consisting of menhirs, dolmens, stone seats and truncated pyramids. Stone terraces and assembling places complete the picture of the most flourishing older megalithic culture in Indonesia.

### Religious background.

Ancient customs and rituals were still fully practised in Nias, until the beginning of the twentieth century. Investigations of the background of the beliefs show similarities with those of the mountain tribes of Assam in the Naga Hills.

Sacrificial feasts accompanied by the slaughter of innumerable cattle are indispensable. These feasts are called "feasts of merit" and are characteristic of the megalithic culture in South East Asia. The erection of megaliths is part of the festivities and the person in whose honour the stone is erected is obliged to distribute precious gifts. The public disposal of wealth will increase his prestige and secure for his soul and his ancestors life in the hereafter. There is a striking resemblance between the cultural elements of the tribes of Assam and the people of Nias.

### Feasts of merit.

The term used in Nias for these feasts is *owasa*. To sponsor an *owasa* a Niasan has to spend all the gold and pigs he has accumulated. Since the *owasa* may be considered as an indication that he is proclaiming a higher status, no pain or expense will be spared. It will guarantee the prestige of the sponsor. He will be given recognition, such as an increased voice in village affairs, the right to wear special decorations and the right to add ornaments to his house (Suzuki 1959: 107).

An integral part of the *owasa* is the megaliths. The erection of stone monuments is associated with the *owasa*, for these stones may not be erected unless the accompanying feasts have been carried out.

It is obvious that the megalithic cult is closely related to the feasts of merit (*owasa*) and that these feasts are inevitably accompanied by the sacrifice of large numbers of pigs and the distribution of gifts among the guests. The display and disposal of



Pl. 3 The *behu*, an upright standing pillar; an outward sign that the deceased has achieved the highest status during his life.

wealth is an essential feature in the religion of the people of Nias. These two aspects, the gaining of prestige for the living and the establishment of connection with the souls of the dead, are the core of a megalithic culture.

Remains of long deserted villages are found in the jungles. The houses have disappeared and only rows of stone monuments which formerly stood in front of the houses are left.

The author had the opportunity in May 1980 to visit the remains of such a village, named *Tundrumbaho* in the district of *Gomo* in central Nias. It lies on a steep plateau surrounded by clouds and mist. But it has a magnificent view over the countryside when the sky is clear.

The basic plan of a Nias village is a large stone paved square with houses along two parallel sides and at the end the house of the village chief. In front of the houses stone structures of the noble families are visible. The groundplan is rectangular and the village is enclosed by a wall. As regards direction the villages don't follow a set plan.

To reach the old village of Tundrumbaho there were stone steps of which the remains are still visible. Two erect stones form the gateway, called *bawagoli*, meaning mouth of the wall, serving as entrance as well as exit.

A few steps from the entrance on either side are elevated terraces, the *harefa*, or rectangular stones arranged in such a way that they could serve as watch posts for the village. Behind these raised platforms, on the left side when entering, is the assembly place, paved with large stone slabs on which stone seats for the elders, the *dao-dao*, are arranged (P1. 2,4,5).

These stone seats, the *dao-dao* or "seats of the deceased", are dedicated with an *owasa* (feast). They are intended as memorials for the dead, a resting place for their souls. But they are also used by the living as seats during council meetings or festive occasions. They developed into artistically shaped benches.

On the stone paved street along which the houses once stood, a long row of upright stones is left. The houses of the chief and his family stood a little higher than the other houses.

Stone steps lead to the next terrace on which stand various megaliths among which the chief monument is a big pillar, namely the *behu* (P1. 3). It has a hole in one side in which the skull of the departed was kept.

*Behus* are square pillars, sometimes obelisk-shaped and often crowned with the figure of a bird. A *behu* may only be erected after the man for whom it is intended has given a certain series of feasts. Then he has the right to set it up in front of his house. It represents the rank and dignity he has achieved during his lifetime.

On top of the *behu* is usually a bird, a specific bird, namely the *hornbill*. Sometimes it does not have a horn but only a long downturned bill, or a short bill with a



Pl. 4 Stone structures in Tundrumbaho, Central Nias; paved roads, menhirs and dolmens.



Pl. 5 Stone columns erected after a certain series of feasts, Tundrumbaho (district Gomo) in Central Nias.



Pl. 6 The lower part of a *niogadi*, a female stone decorated with the "tumpal border".



Pl. 7 Decoration of a *niogadi* with geometrical designs; a border with lozenges and double spirals.

horn. At Tundrumbahu there is a *behu* topped with a long beaked bird with horns on the beak. Schnitger reported a *behu* with a well formed head of a hornbill about 40 cm long with horns on the head and large ornaments in the ears (Schnitger 1939: 151).

The *hornbill* in Indonesian art is a symbol of death and resurrection (Van der Hoop 1932). It often adorns the death ship which carries the soul of the deceased to the hereafter. Stylized hornbill heads appear today in carved figure heads of boats on Lake Toba. Among the Dayak of Kalimantan the hornbill is still venerated. We even find a drawing of a hornbill in a cave on the island of Wamera in West Irian. In Nias dancers still wear a black mask and a hornbill on the head (Pl. 8). The mask with a triangle shaped nose is very similar to the faces of the images of Easter Island.

The main reason for placing the hornbill on the *behu* is the concept of rebirth and resurrection.

If a Niasan intends to set up a *behu* in front of his house, one of the conditions is that he has had his gold ornaments melted down and cast into new forms. This might be an indication that in Nias megaliths and gold go together<sup>5)</sup>. Gold and proper gold jewelry are necessary investments to sponsor an *owasa* (feast). Gold is closely related with the upperworld and especially considered as "giver of life" (Suzuki 1959). It is supposed that gold radiates a powerful magic. Women have the right to display their gold jewelry on their stones, the *niogadi* (see below) and that it gives the stones a magic power.

The *behu* is a typical monument for a man, an upright stone. Stones erected for females, whether living or dead, are placed horizontally. Vertically placed stones are called "masculine stones" and recumbent stones are "female stones" (Suzuki, 1959: 113). Suzuki reported that some horizontally flat stones are round with a hole in the centre and that upright "masculine stone" are placed in this hole.

The same principle is expressed in the *lingga-yoni*, which developed much later during the classical (Hindu-Buddhist) period in Indonesia. The *lingga* was originally a phallic symbol rising from an altar shaped pedestal, the *yoni*, a female counterpart.

The "female stones" in Nias developed into round stones, shaped like mushrooms which are called *niogadi* (Pl. 2,4,5).

If a man wishes to marry, he must provide a *niogadi* for the girl which requires for an *owasa* (feast). All the wives of chiefs and noblemen possess their own *niogadi*.

Usually a *niogadi* is about one meter high but there are smaller and larger specimens. The base consists of a short pillar, which like the stem of a flower turns into an ogive-shaped section with a flat upper surface. This semi circular part is often decorated, sometimes with a band of rosettes, squares or loops. The "tumpal border", of triangles is a favoured design (Pl.6). Another *niogadi* is adorned with a band of lozenges and double spirals (Pl. 7).

The wives of chiefs and prominent villagers dance on these stones during festive



Pl. 8 Dancer with a large black mask and a hornbill's head.



Pl. 9 *Osa-osas* and round *niogadis* viewed from top.



Pl. 10 A single headed *osa-osa* intended for men; Tundrumbaho,  
Central Nias.



Pl. 11 *Osa-osas* viewed from side; the head is a combination of hornbill and deer.

occasions. They welcome guests by dancing on the *niogadi*, chanting a welcome and presenting the guests with the traditional betel quid.

The *niogadi* produces a musical sound when struck with the flat of the hand. The women place their gold ornaments on the stone to imbue it with power. Sometimes there are so many *niogadis* that they form a terrace.

Standing on the terraces are stone benches shaped like oval disks with animals' heads on one side and tails on the other. They are called *osa-osa* (seats of honour) and play a prominent role in the culture of Nias (Pl. 9).

The *osa-osa* also refers to a seat made of wood in the form of an animal in which a chief and his wife are carried around the village, while the people praise him in song. Stone *osa-osas* (seats of honour) are erected after a series of ceremonies and feasts has been completed.

The single headed figures for men are round or oval (Pl.10) and sometimes have male genitals. The triple headed seats with three tails for women, have breasts carved on the under surface on the front edge. The heads are supposed to represent deer, though not in a recognizable way. They have big curling lips and broad protruding tongues; in the jaws are great incisors, sometimes tusks. The nose resembles the hornbill and on the head are sometimes two small horns. The ears are adorned with ornaments and clearly visible is the big necklace around the throat, the *kalabuhu* (headhunter's necklace) (Pl. 11).

A small *osa-osa* is also placed upon the *behu*, the pillar which has been discussed above.

All along the yard in Tundrumbaho are stones named *saitagari*; small pillars, sometimes decorated with geometrical designs, on which the guests who attend the *owasa* (feast) used to place their headgear and weapons.

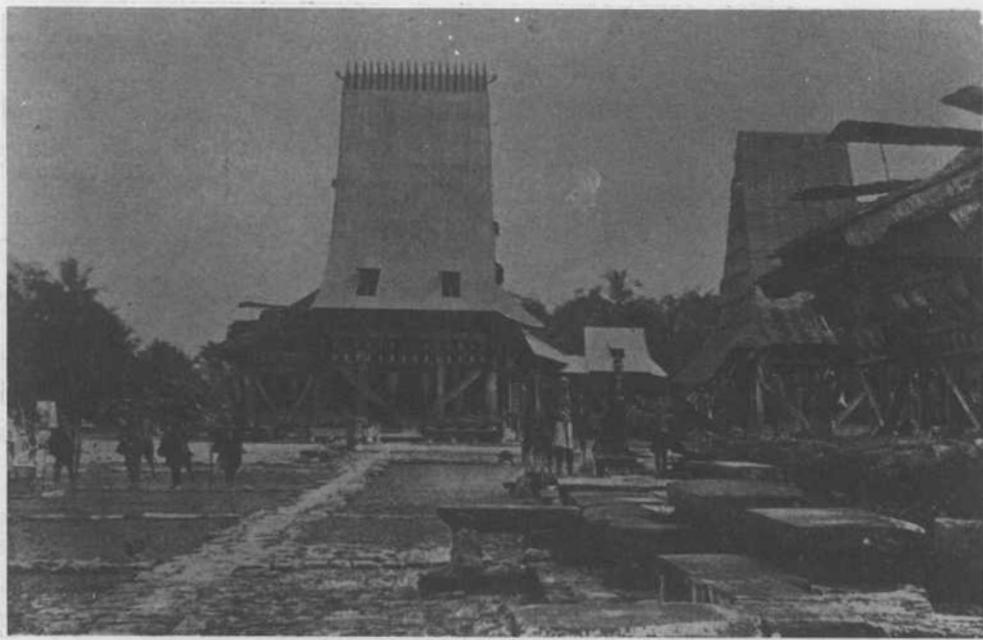
Several aspects of the megalithic complex are notable in the varying degrees in the different parts of the island.

In southern Nias architecture is predominant. The richest form of such a complex is the village of *Bawomataluo* (= sunhill), about 14 km from Teluk Dalam, the harbour of the south.

Situated high on a hill, it was formerly reachable only from the village of Orahili. A stone staircase leading from this village was built in four flights and consisted of more than 700 steps. Nowadays it is possible to reach Bawomataluo by road and only one flight of 70 steps leads to the village, built to please the tourists.

*Bawomataluo* is one of the traditional villages still occupied and arranged on a definite pattern. Stone paved streets lined with houses lead to a large open square, the big assembly place in front of the chief's house.

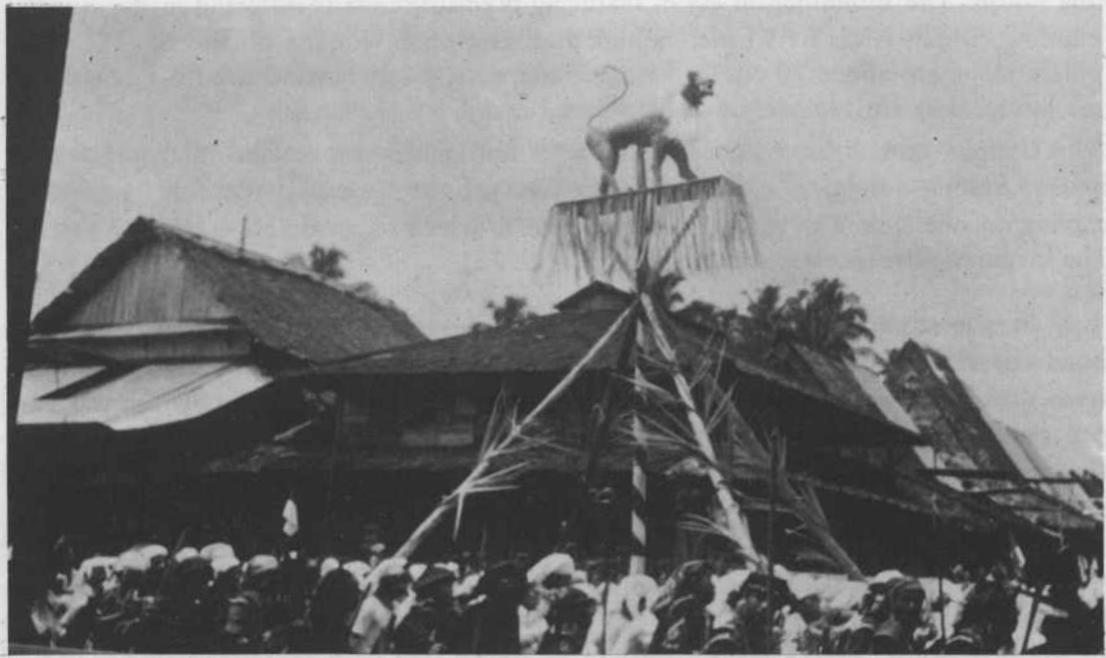
Stone columns, stone seats, round tables and flat stone slabs stand in front of the houses. The chief's house itself is the finest specimen of architecture. The inclination to create imposing architectonic forms in the megalithic art of Nias is displayed in



Pl. 12 The chieftain's house at Bawomataluo (South Nias); stone structures in front of the houses.



Pl. 13 Decoration on a stone seat in front of the chief's house at Bawomataluo.



Pl. 14 A tiger image on a platform is carried along during a dance performance in Bawomataluo



Pl. 15 Stone jumping, originally an initiation ritual.

this house. The monumental style, featuring prehistoric art is reflected in the sturdy building, which is about 23 meters high and rests upon wooden pillars (P1. 12). The pillars alone are about 70 cm in diameter and extend out beyond the floor length of the house; they are a marvel of pile building.

Upright monoliths, massive stone seats and tables are erected in front of the house. Among them is a large *dao-dao* (seat of the deceased) with an interesting carving on one side. The carving shows a scene in which four men are catching a shark. The favoured Nias rosettes are also depicted (Pl. 13).

In the stone paved space of the village dances are still performed. Sometimes hundreds of warriors with helmets and daggers are involved. In olden times the warriors were dressed in a metal armour jacket with upturned shoulder wings. Those war capes were used until the second world war.

In front of the loincloth they still wear a rattan ball studded with crocodile or pig teeth and around the neck the inevitable headhunter's necklace, the *kalabuhu*<sup>6)</sup>.

Dances in Nias are characterized by high jumps which are very unusual in other Indonesian dances.

In the war dance, performed by a group of armed men with spears and shields, artificial beards and mustaches, two hostile groups attack each other in a prearranged combat.

In the ring or circle dances, the participants hold hands and move counter clockwise in a ring, chanting together. The tempo accelerates and the men begin to shout, jumping into the air, swinging their swords and pretending combat.

The performance of mock battle has religious significance. It signifies that before the dual aspects of the cosmos become united and dissolve into unity or totality of all existence, struggle and tension will take place. Unity and duality is an important aspect in the autochthonic Indonesian world.

An interesting dance in Bawomataluo may have originated in the so called tiger feast<sup>7)</sup>.

Formerly villages subject to a chief village, were compelled to bring a huge wooden tiger image standing on a high platform and carried by as many as forty men to the principal village. The villagers assembled in the village square and dances were performed while the deeds of the chief were praised in song. At the end the tiger image was carried in procession around the village. This dance is still performed today (P1. 14).

The stone-jumping is worth mentioning. This must have been an initiation ritual. The jumping structure is erected on the stone paved square of the village. Every man should be able to jump over this solid structure, a truncated pyramid built of stones about two meters high. In front of the pyramid is a smaller stone about half a meter high. From a distance of 20 m the man runs toward this stepping stone and launches himself into the air, over the pyramid (P1. 15)<sup>8)</sup>.

The megalithic monumental style rooted in the older megalithic complex has

reached its culmination on the island of Nias. The perfection of the stone monuments, often more or less sculptured, surpasses stone monuments in other areas in Indonesia.

The primitive menhirs and dolmens have been transformed into refined forms and developed into various new forms. The simple menhir has been converted into a tall obelisk or polygonal pillar or a low stele ending in a volute. The dolmens have become round stone tables (*niogadi*) or stone seats (*dao-dao* and *osa-osa*).

The stone seats developed in South Nias into elaborate thrones, like the one found in *Hilisimaetano*. The stone is shaped like the upper part of a human body with the arms stretched forward as armrests. In both hands the figure clasps a kind of short dagger. The head however, is a fantastic bird with a beak from which two long tusks emerge with *kalabuhus* (necklaces) hanging on them (P1. 16).

On the back of the seat is carved an iguana or big lizard which has his front paws put on the protrusions above the shoulders of the human body (P1.17). The lizard or much bigger iguana is supposed to represent the souls of ancestors<sup>9</sup>.

On the outside of the back and the armrests are ornaments carved in the form of rosettes. These rosettes placed in circles are a favoured ornamental design in Nias until today.

In Central Nias development of the menhirs took a very different form. They were converted into stone statues, the so called menhir statues. Sometimes the human features are only vaguely indicated and they are straight and strictly frontal (P1. 18).

Some of them date from prehistoric time, others were erected in historic periods and are made of a huge stone. They are always regarded with veneration.

A larger than life-sized statue is found in the district of *Hiligowe* (Mandrehe) in north central Nias. Its total height is about 3 m (P1. 19).

It is an ithyphallic ancestor statue and is very characteristic of the megalithic tradition in Indonesia. The setting is distinctly frontal and the face is almost reduced to geometrical outlines. Around the neck is the thick ring (*kalabuhu*) and ear pendants hang on the ears. Beneath the folded hand on its stomach a lizard is discernable. The head gear is a forerunner of the high triangle-shaped headgear of the later developed wooden ancestral figures. In front of the statue is a flat stone on which sacrifices are placed.

The wooden ancestral figures which developed much later as reproductions of the menhir statues are not too remote in form and meaning from their prehistoric counterparts. Originally simple poles with a superficial indication of eyes and mouth, they later became naturalistic human images. The wooden carvings are mostly ancestral and guardian figures. They are seated or squatting images with large, elaborately crowned heads and distended right ear lobes. Many of these ancestral figures have two horns shaped like two pronged forks on their heads. These horns are reminiscent of the sacrificial poles of wood or stone to which cattle about to be sacrificed were tied (P1. 20).



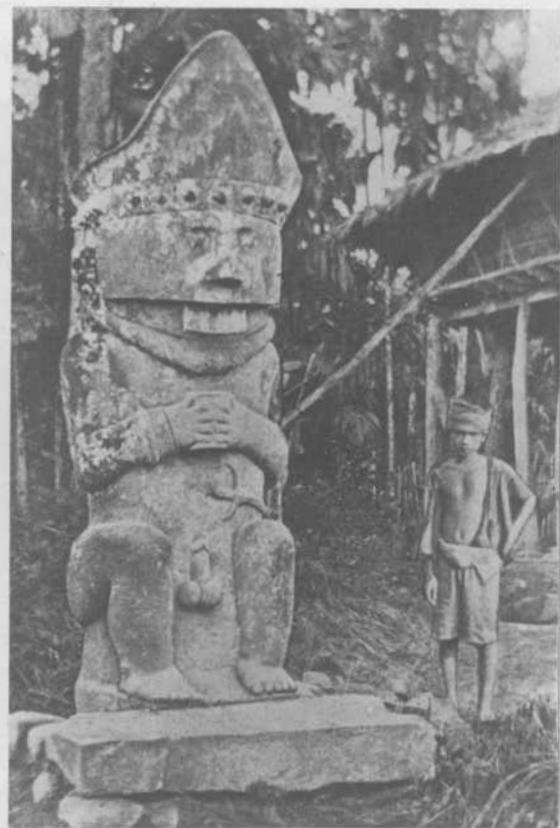
Pl. 16 A stone seat in Hilisimaetano (South Nias), shaped as the upper part of a human body with a bird's head.



Pl. 17 The same stone with the carving of an iguana on the back



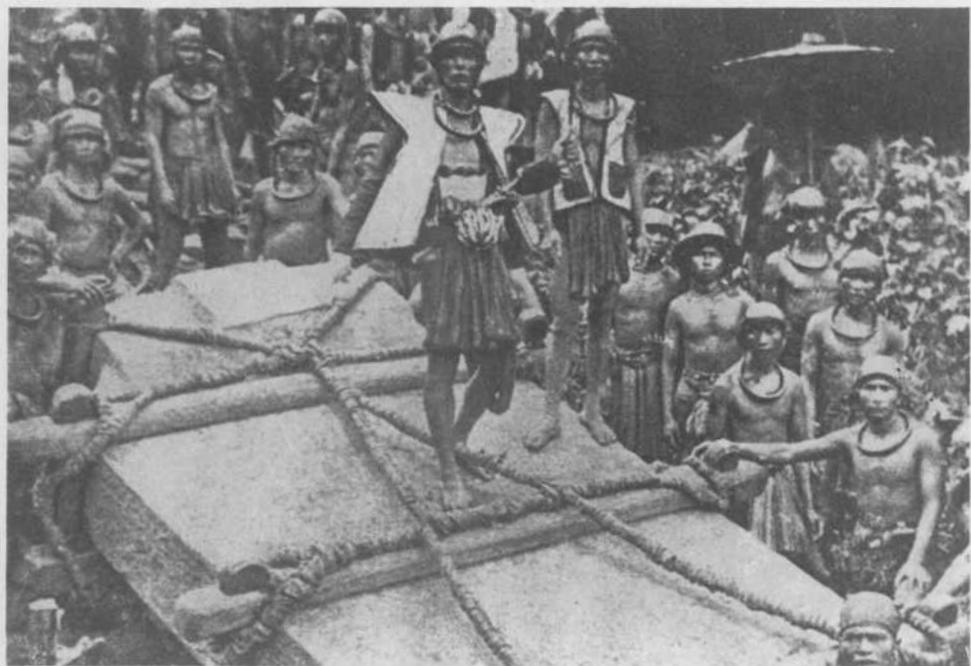
Pl. 18 Stone images from Central Nias.



Pl. 19 A human statue from Hiligowe (Mandrehe) in Central Nias; height  $\pm$  3 m.



Pl. 20 Wooden ancestral figures.



Pl. 21 How a stone is brought into the village; the sponsor is standing on the stone and swings his sword in the air (Photo 1928).

The Niasans though islanders are not a seafaring people and the craft of boat building is not developed. Almost the entire population is engaged in agriculture and pig breeding.

The religion is highly complex as every event produces a culmination of ceremonies and festivities accompanied by the slaughtering of pigs. Each Niasan is obliged to sponsor certain feasts (owasa), whether to acquire a new rank and title or to the memory of a deceased. The construction of stone monuments is an integral part of these feasts.

Whole villages cooperate in the transportation of those stones to a village. Before a stone is brought into the village, the sponsor first has to look for a proper and suitable stone and starts the ceremonies of sacrificing pigs. Surrounding villages are invited to cooperate in dragging the stone to the village. Sometimes stones are brought from kilometers away over hills and rivers. If it is a large stone, a sledge is constructed of tree trunks, running on rollers and pulled by rattan ropes. The sponsor stands on the stone and swings his sword in the air now and then (P1. 21)<sup>10</sup>). The work often takes over a hundred men and may last for several months.

There is no denying that social and religious life in Nias is largely dominated by megaliths and is dependent on those stones. The people of Nias are surviving megalithic users for whom the question of dating is unimportant. Ancient and recent megaliths are treated in the same way.

Consequently we may conclude that a developed megalithic cult has flourished in Nias, following an older tradition that started in neolithic times.

#### Final remarks.

Extensive and excellent research on Nias has been carried out in the past concerning the anthropology and religion of the island. However, serious archaeological research has never been undertaken. A systematic exploration in association with other disciplines such as geology, physical anthropology and biology would be the solution. It would throw more light on the various stages of development and could provide evidence about the megaliths and their association with the neolithic quadrangular adze and the bronze iron age.

The only archaeological survey was done by Schnitger in 1938 but since it was a superficial exploration of the monuments, the data he could gather seem not to have been enough for a comprehensive recording. It was published as a chapter in his *Forgotten Kingdoms in Sumatra* in 1939 and as articles in journals. But since they are the only recordings of archaeological sites and contain detailed description of the stone structures, they are an important source of data.

Despite diverse interpretations of the megaliths of Nias, no one would disagree that the stone structures exhibit little cultural loss and that they developed upon an indigenous basis. Prehistoric research in South East Asia has greatly increased but before rejecting old interpretations and changing the terminology it is essential to produce an improved replacement.

Heine Geldern's attempt to distinguish between "older" and "younger" megalithic finds no support in recent interpretations. Glover doubts that it is a useful way of interpreting the various prehistoric stone structures of Indonesia (Glover 1979: 181).

Nevertheless this article emphasizes the very specific stone structures of Nias and extensively stresses the relationship between material expression and religious belief.

Concerning the "vexed" question of the megaliths in Indonesia, some scholars now reject the term "megalithic culture". According to them "they have no common features and there is no intra-regional nor inter-regional unity within South East Asia" (Glover, Bronson, Bayard 1979: 254).

But as long as terms such as "stone culture" and "bronze culture" are widely used by prehistorians there is no reason to reject "megalithic culture". It has never been supposed that megaliths should always be stones of considerable size.

As to the origin of the megaliths, the assumption that cultural elements originated with one people in one particular period and then spread to other areas is not always satisfactory. The spreading from one centre is not necessary. Elementary ideas ("Elementargedanke") may explain the sameness of elements. Megaliths could have developed in far distant countries independently and still have common features.

Seen in this light the "label" megalithic culture can be applied to the culture of the people of Nias and recognized as an integral part of the society in the past as well as in recent times<sup>11</sup>).

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I am most grateful to Professor Wolters, Cornell University, for having given valuable comments and suggestions on my original paper.

I also wish to thank Jean Bush Aden for advising me on the English text.

## NOTES

1. Oral tradition has it that when foreigners landed on the island for the first time, the people shouted to each other "niha si, niha si", literally meaning "look, people (man)" and ever since that time the island has been called *Nias*.
2. See o.a. Bayard, Donn 1980 "The roots of Indochinese civilisation; recent developments in the prehistory of Southeast Asia" in *Pacific Affairs*, 51, 1, pp. 89–114 and Solheim, W.G., II 1969 "Reworking Southeast Asian Prehistory" in *Paideuma*, pp 125 – 139.
3. See Report of the National Research Centre of Archaeology on excavation in Central Sulawesi, in *Berita Penelitian Arkeologi* no. 25, 1980 by Harris Sukendar, with English summary. The excavation of a stone vat in Birantua indicates that the stone vat was used for burial purposes. Further research proved that the burial practices followed the megalithic tradition of burying the dead in the vicinity of their dwelling.
4. In the National Museum in Jakarta several ceramics from the Han period found in South Sumatra are on display: no.1510, an earthenware funerary jar found in Tulang Bawang, Lampung; no. 2358, an earthenware jar from Jambi; no. 3159 an earthenware funerary jar with cover from Kerinci; no. 3253, an earthenware incense burner from Kerinci; no. 3257, an earthenware incense burner from Palembang; no. 3301 an earthenware jar from Kerinci; no. 3317, an earthenware jar from Jambi and no. 3516, an earthenware jar from Bengkulu.
5. See also Harrison, T. 1970 "Gold and megalithic activity in prehistoric and recent West Borneo", Ithaca, Cornell University; S.E.A. Data Paper no.77.
6. The *kalabuhu*, a thick dark coloured ring put around the neck was a mark of distinction among headhunters. It became a sign of honour worn by chiefs and noblemen.
7. The tiger in some parts of Indonesia is often considered as a sort of double, a man's attendant and which is able to impersonate him. The tiger is referred to with veneration and it is the honorary title for brave warriors.
8. Children and young people in Nias are very skillfull in high hurdling over the stone hedges in the village. The term in the Indonesian language "batu loncatan" (= stepping stone) indicates a means used to achieve a higher aim.
9. The lizard or bigger iguana is venerated also in many parts of Polynesia. It is believed that the ancestral souls enter into these creatures. Lizards carved on doors or walls are supposed to keep away evil spirits. See G.A. Wilken, "De hagedis in het Volksgeloof der Malayo-Polynesiërs", in *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-en Volkenkunde* XL (1891), p. 477 – 479.
10. The picture was made in 1928. Schnitger took it from Lamster, J.C. 1928 "Stenen monumenten op Nias en Sumba", in *Onze Aarde* 2: 1 – 12.

11. See Glover, I.C., Bronson, B. and Bayard, D.T. 1979 "Comment on "Megaliths" in South East Asia" in *Early South East Asia*, p. 254. The label "megalithic culture" cannot reasonably be applied to any of the phases or levels of social integration recognizable in the recent or prehistoric past of South East Asia.

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### Acknowledgment of plates:

Reproduction Schnitger, 1939: Pl. 1,6,7,8,9,18 and 21

Reproduction Kleiweg de Zwaan, 1929: Pl. 16, 17 and 19

Reproduction Loeb, 1935: Pl. 12 and 20

R.P. Soejono: Pl. 10

Author : Pl. 2, 3, 4, 5, 11, 13, 14 and 15

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